

# Sam Houston

# SAM HOUSTON

# A Man Too Big for Texas

By BART McDOWELL ASSISTANT EDITOR

Photographs by CHARLES O'REAR WEST LIGHT

**T**HE CHEROKEE called him Co-lo-neh, or Raven, and they taught Sam Houston their forest secrets—their cures, their ways of hunting game, their omens and amulets. He learned well, for the man Sam Houston cast a spell of his own. His life does yet.

One day, for example, I was following his trail into Cherokee country near the Oklahoma town of Tahlequah. Just as I crossed a creek Indians call Co-lo-neh, I saw two ravens in a tree. They moved restlessly—then flew off together, south . . . toward Texas.

A twinned coincidence, I told myself. But also a fit metaphor for the dual nature of Sam Houston, a man by turns coarse and courtly, cautious and reckless, a man famed for ornate oratory and mystic silences. This year, as we Texans celebrate our 150th year of independence, we share with fellow Americans our hero Houston, born a Virginian, raised a Tennessean, a man even we concede too large for a single state.

Houston's reputation has not always seemed so sunny. He did some unpopular things that many 19th-century Texans deplored. He was the champion of Indian rights and a bitter foe of Texas secession. He also had some Texas-size faults.

"When I was growing up, I didn't want to admit I was related to Sam Houston," Jean Houston Daniel told me; she is the great man's great-great-granddaughter. "I had heard those stories about his drinking and his living with the Indians. I didn't fully appreciate Houston much until I married *that* young man." She nodded toward her husband, Price Daniel, long a Houston buff before he himself followed those famous footprints to the United States Senate and the governor's office in Austin.

Sam Houston IV, a Texas businessman, chose not to name either of his sons



CULVER PICTURES (FACING PAGE); DAVID NANCE

**A commanding presence served Sam Houston well as U. S. senator from Texas from 1846 to 1859 (facing page). A gold ring, his mother's gift (above), bears the motto that guided his extraordinary career as frontiersman, soldier, and statesman.**

Sam V: "Too much of a burden for them, I felt." The mantle still weighs heavy. But Sam Houston's stature has increased with time. Marquis James wrote a prize-winning Houston biography in the 1920s, *The Raven*. The Texas Centennial in 1936 brought a closer look at Houston's deeds. And John F. Kennedy paid him homage with a chapter in his 1955 *Profiles in Courage*.

"He was one of us," says Lady Bird Johnson, "or at least the way we like to think of ourselves. So courageous, so daring. Flamboyant, yes, but he was also tough and a man of vision who dreamed big dreams."

The governor of Tennessee, Lamar Alexander, calls Sam Houston "the most interesting figure in Tennessee history." The Alexanders have named a son William Houston Alexander. So much for Texas ownership.

**I** CONFESS a personal bias: Sam Houston was a friend of my great-grandfather and figured in family folklore. (Pappy, as we called him, took Sam's advice and cast his county's only vote against secession.) But this year I have followed Sam Houston's migrations, read his letters and speeches, and even examined some fanciful bits of wood that he was forever whittling. I've read what his enemies and neighbors said, and have talked with Cherokee whose forebears knew him well. I know Sam Houston better now. And admire him even more.

Sam Houston's birthplace—a rustic log house—long ago tumbled into dust, but a marker on Highway 11, near Lexington, Virginia, notes the spot. Just as well: The highway itself is a better memorial to his restless, westbound spirit.

He was born on March 2, 1793, the fifth of nine children. His mother, Elizabeth Paxton Houston, was a brave lady, managing the farm while her soldier husband, Maj. Samuel Houston, served as inspector of militia, traveling over Virginia. When the major died, it was the widow who moved her brood by wagon west to Blount County, Tennessee, where her husband had bought land. Sam was then a rangy 14. He would remember his father for "indomitable courage" and his mother as "gifted with intellectual and moral qualities . . . nerved with a stern fortitude."

Near Baker's Creek I paced off a portion of the Houston family's 419 acres, hard and hilly, in summer supremely green, a fertile land that smells of hay. On the horizon stands a blue view of Chilhowee Mountain, scenery easier to praise than to cultivate. Especially for young Sam; farming always bored him. Between chores—or instead of them—Sam read books, some carted over the mountains from Virginia, majestic books like Alexander Pope's translation of *The Iliad*. At 15 he ran away and lived with a band of 300 Cherokee Indians. Four decades later he recalled in some autobiographical notes "nothing half so sweet . . . as this sojourn . . . among the untutored children of the forest." That sojourn lasted, off and on, for three years, and the chief, Oo-loo-te-ka, adopted the fatherless Sam as his son.

After the Cherokee gave him the title Co-lo-neh, Sam Houston regarded the raven as his talisman, a sign of his personal destiny.

"The raven is a bird of honor, but Co-lo-neh is also a Cherokee military rank, a leader of war parties," notes Leon Gilmore, tribal historian of the Cherokee nation in Oklahoma. "Sam Houston would have learned a lot about the rituals of making medicine."

**T**HE CHEROKEE offered Sam both friendship and credit. But, at age 19, Sam returned to Maryville, Tennessee, determined to earn money to pay debts. Though short of formal education, he set himself up as a schoolmaster, charging eight dollars a term tuition, payable in cash, corn, and "domestic cotton cloth." Years later he recalled that his time as a schoolmaster gave him "a higher feeling of dignity and self-satisfaction than any office or honor . . . later held."

His log schoolhouse stands near Maryville, meticulously rebuilt in a wooded valley surrounded by tobacco farms and dairy pastures. "White-tailed deer still come

to graze and lick our salt block," said curator Norman Harris. A spring—Sam Houston's own—still seeps silently at the foot of a nearby maple. Algae flotsam and a sign ("unsafe for drinking") warn off visitors today.

The Blount County seat, Maryville, was the setting for another chapter in Sam's life. Here he enlisted to protect his country in the War of 1812, vowing that his Maryville neighbors "shall hear of me."

Quickly promoted from private to ensign to third lieutenant, he was ordered south to fight the Indian allies of the British, the Creek. His commander was Tennessee's own Gen. Andrew Jackson. In the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in eastern Alabama, Sam caught a barbed arrow in his thigh, and General Jackson himself ordered Houston out of the battle. But the Creek fought with bitter bravery, retreating to their last redoubt, a covered ravine, beyond the reach of artillery. When no one else volunteered to lead a charge, Houston—hours after his injury—painfully dashed down the slope to portholes bristling with guns and arrows. He was five yards from the redoubt when two bullets smashed his right shoulder.

After the victory a doctor removed one lead ball but left the other embedded in Houston's shoulder. Why torture a man so certain to die?

He survived, but the wound never completely healed. Andrew Jackson went on to win the Battle of New Orleans against the British without his wounded lieutenant, but Old Hickory's admiration for Sam Houston was fixed for all time.

**T**HE YOUNG VETERAN soon became an Indian agent and even accompanied one Cherokee delegation to Washington. A wider world had opened for Houston, but he returned to Nashville, population 3,000, the backwoods capital of Tennessee. He borrowed books to read law and finished his 18-month legal studies in six months. He was elected prosecuting attorney and then major general of the Tennessee militia. Of course, he was a frequent guest at Andrew Jackson's plantation, the Hermitage. The moment was propitious: Tennesseans were planning a U. S. Presidency for their victorious general.

The Hermitage today still evokes the atmosphere of great events. It grew over the years from a cluster of log cabins to one of the grandest residences of the West.

Sam Houston was comfortable there and already built to its scale. If Hermitage ceilings were 14 feet high, well, Sam himself "stood six feet six inches in his socks . . . a remarkably well proportioned man, and of . . . gallant bearing." So wrote his contemporary Judge J. C. Guild. "He enjoyed unbounded popularity . . ." No wonder Houston was a welcome guest of Aunt Rachel, as he called Mrs. Jackson; in the Hermitage dining room today, a large silver tray on the sideboard (page 315) is traditionally "a gift from Sam Houston." Perhaps it came later when Sam was more prosperous. At this point in his life Sam's compliments were more extravagant than his presents. He wrote Jackson, "You have been your countrys . . . faithful guardian. . . . The next President will be the 'People's choice.' "



SAN JACINTO MUSEUM OF HISTORY ASSOCIATION, HOUSTON

*"Magnificent barbarian" to many in white society, Houston was the "Raven" to Cherokee who adopted him as a teenager. He later lobbied for the tribe in Washington, where he wore Cherokee garb, as he did for this portrait.*



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

**"If you fail this time, I'll smite you to the earth,"** cried 21-year-old Sam Houston to a fellow officer who had tried to remove a Creek arrow from Houston's thigh during the War of 1812. Bleeding profusely, Houston then led a charge at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, Alabama, that won the admiration of his commanding officer, Andrew Jackson.



**Bonds of battle united Houston and Jackson in lifelong friendship. When Sam was challenged to a duel, Old Hickory coached him to steady his pistol (below) by biting a bullet. Jackson also steered his protégé through the crossfire of politics in Tennessee, where Houston was congressman and governor. The Hermitage, Jackson's home, preserves a silver tray (left) described as a gift from Houston.**



Old Hickory looked proudly at his brave young friend and sent the word: Sam Houston, age 30, became a U. S. congressman.

He plunged deep into congressional intrigues to make Jackson President, recruiting friends, infuriating foes. In Tennessee he was even challenged to a duel by one William A. White, the political ally of a disgruntled office seeker. Houston chose pistols at 15 feet. He practiced marksmanship at the Hermitage with Old Hickory as coach, according to Marquis James. To steady your aim, Jackson advised, bite on a bullet. The duelers met in a pasture just across the Kentucky boundary. Sam fired, severely wounding White. He thanked God when White recovered.

Jackson then coached Houston for another conflict, a hotly contested race for governor of Tennessee. Houston used his mentor's campaign techniques, slapping backs, mixing with crowds at barn raisings. He became governor at 34.

**W**HEN JACKSON was elected President in 1828, the young governor was the man to watch as a logical successor. He had it all. Almost.

Noting his success with ladies, friends urged him to marry and settle down. They could have saved their breath, because Houston had fallen deeply in love, "and it may be that I will splice myself with a rib," he confided to a friend. The girl was Eliza Allen, 18-year-old daughter of a powerful family.

On January 22, 1829, as Sam Houston approached his bride's home for the wedding, he saw a raven flutter and die in the road. Or so Houston later recalled. But no omen could have been as dark as events following the wedding.

Less than three months after the elaborate ceremony, Tennesseans were shocked to learn that Eliza had returned to her parents' house. The marriage was finished. Houston said only, "This is a painful, but it is a private affair." One week later, the governor wrote, "It has become my duty to resign."



## Birth of a New Republic

"ALL NEW States are infested, more or less, by a class of noisy, second-rate men, who are always in favor of rash and extreme measures. But Texas was absolutely overrun by such men." Thus a biographer described Houston's adopted home in 1832. Many of his new neighbors howled for independence from Mexico, which meant war. Houston urged caution. But in 1836, after Mexican dictator Santa Anna and his well-trained

army of 4,500 crossed the Rio Grande to stamp out rebellion, Houston took charge of the Texas army—a ragtag force of 900 that was little more than an armed mob.

Santa Anna split his army, sending a small force east under Gen. José Urrea. He led the rest toward Washington-on-the-Brazos, where upstart Texans were writing a declaration of independence.

Then came the Alamo. The news of Santa Anna's cruel

victory sent frontier settlers bolting east for the safety of U. S. territory. Behind came Houston's army, its general desperately maneuvering for position. After more than a month of retreat, Houston finally confronted his foe at San Jacinto. To the terrified people of Texas, the results of that battle (pages 322-3) were like a miracle. They quickly elected Houston, the miracle worker, president of their new republic.

Houston's descendants today believe that Eliza was a young girl persuaded by her family to marry an older man with a great future—and then found she did not love him. Others have speculated that Eliza loved someone else . . . that Houston flew into a jealous rage . . . or that Houston's old war wounds were repugnant to his young bride. Certainly his spirit was wounded.

Houston always defended Eliza's name, but drunk or sober, even after their divorce and Eliza's remarriage, he never told the story. Instead, he caught the river steamboat *Red Rover* and sailed west on the Cumberland. He would live with old Cherokee friends, now resettled on the Arkansas River.

"I was in an agony of despair and strongly tempted to . . . end my worthless life," he wrote later. "At that moment, however, an eagle swooped down near my head, and then, soaring aloft with wildest screams, was lost in the rays of the setting sun. I knew that a great destiny waited for me in the West."

An eagle, not a raven? Cherokee historian Gilmore explains: "The eagle is sacred. It's good luck to see an eagle."

ON HIS WAY WEST Houston was already thinking of Texas, then a part of Mexico's state of Coahuila. Along the way Sam wrote a friend that he might "conquer Mexico or Texas, and be worth two millions in two years."

The bravado of a heartsick man, perhaps, but President Jackson heard of the letter and wrote his friend for reassurance, "I cannot believe you have any such chimerical visionary scheme in view." Answering from what is now Oklahoma, Houston gave Jackson a pledge to do nothing "to injure, or involve my country."

His adoptive father, Oo-loo-te-ka, gave Houston a warm speech of welcome: "My wigwam is yours—my home is yours—my people are yours—rest with us."

So Houston, wearing leather shirt and beads, let his hair grow again for plaiting in a queue. And in a brief time—such was the force of Houston's personality—he became one of the most influential men among the Cherokee, Osage, and even his old adversaries the Creek. His letters lobbied the War Department for fairer dealings with the red man. He opened a trading post near the Neosho River.

Though still legally married to Eliza, Houston took a Cherokee wife, Tiana Rogers, a famously beautiful widow. "Cherokee permitted polygamy in those days," notes Gilmore. "It was a Christian ceremony—I've seen it in a family Bible."

But at his trading post, the Wigwam Neosho, Houston remained a troubled man. "He'd make a sale and have a party; that's the tradition," says Gilmore. Others confirm the tales. Houston drank heavily of ardent spirits, as they called liquor; he even earned a new sobriquet, Oo-tse-tee Ar-dee-tah-skee, translated as Big Drunk.

THE YEAR 1831 was a fulcrum for Sam Houston. His mother lay dying in Tennessee, and Houston returned in time to bid her good-bye. She was buried on a steep, green hillside beside Baker's Creek Presbyterian Church.

Time has settled the cemetery headstones so they now stand askew, "and we don't know the exact gravesite—it's toward the middle of the cemetery," notes local historian Mrs. Edith Little. Nor do we know what regrets the hymns and Scriptures may have stirred for the grieving Sam Houston. Certainly, the long, jolting miles from the family farm to this country church attested this woman's faith and her determination. Sam returned to his wigwam changed.

Soon he was heading east again, accompanying a Cherokee delegation to see President Jackson in Washington. On the way Houston stopped at Nashville, visited the Hermitage, and on its grounds cut a hickory sapling to make himself a cane.

Weeks later, in Washington, Sam Houston found dramatic use for his cane. In the House of Representatives an Ohio congressman, William Stanberry, denounced the Jackson Administration and accused Houston of dishonesty. A rash act. Houston tried to challenge Stanberry to a duel; the congressman refused



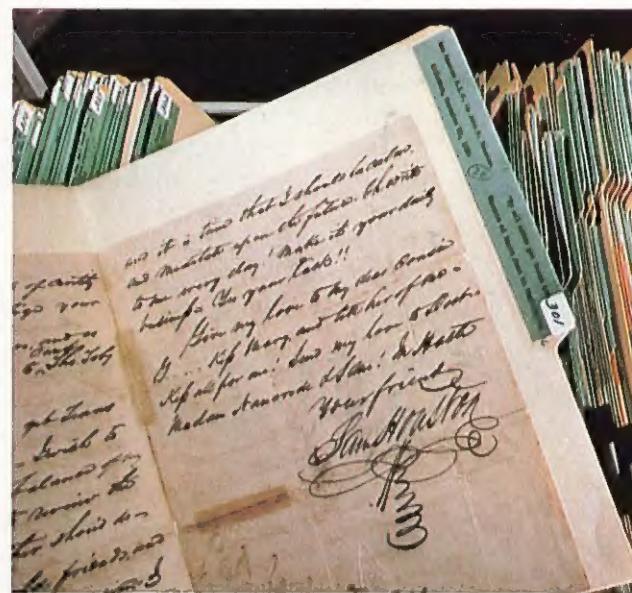
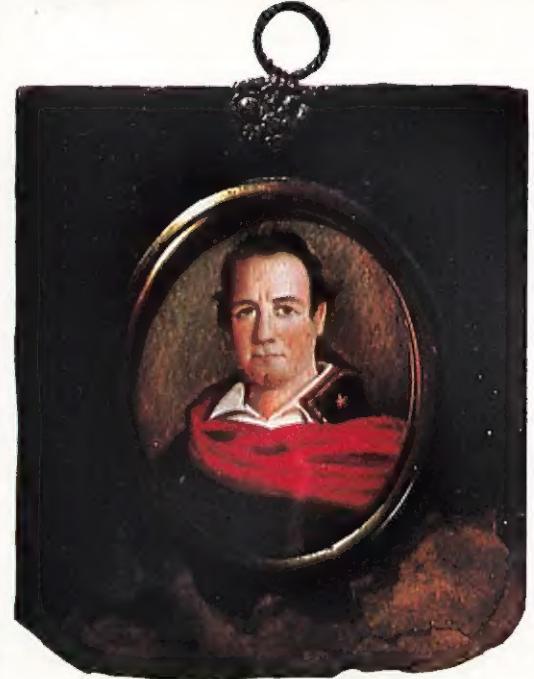
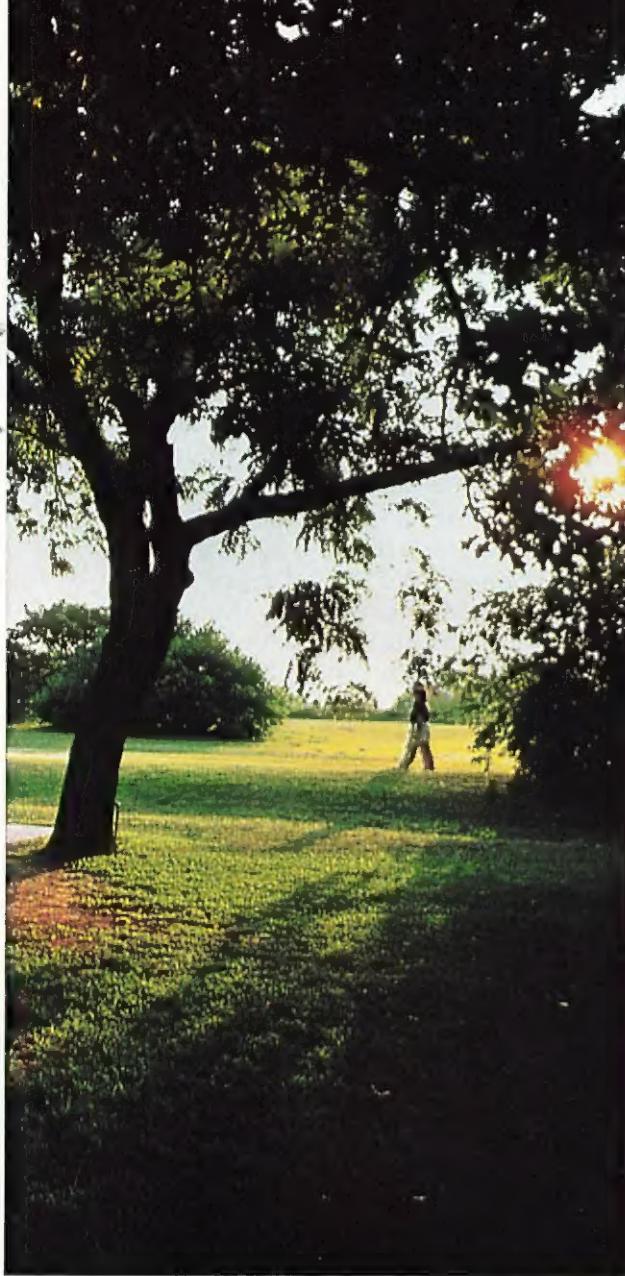
**Texas' declaration of independence** was signed March 2, 1836—while Santa Anna laid siege to the Alamo—in a tiny wood-frame building in Washington-on-the-Brazos. A replica of the hall stands at the original site (above). Within months,

Houston's note—but took the precaution of arming himself with two pistols.

Two weeks later Houston encountered Stanberry on Pennsylvania Avenue, called him a "damned rascal," and whacked the congressman with his cane. In the ensuing fight Stanberry drew a pistol, pressed it against Houston's chest, and pulled the trigger. The charge did not explode. Houston disarmed the congressman, then lifted Stanberry's feet in the air and "struck him elsewhere," as a witness delicately testified.

President Jackson's enemies arranged for Houston's arrest for contempt and trial before the House of Representatives. The incident became a national sensation.

Jackson himself worried about his friend's buckskin clothes—and gave him



Houston was writing a letter (bottom right) to his cousin John in which he expressed his desire to "get Texas annexed to the United States." The hero of San Jacinto (top right) had long shared this dream with his mentor, President Andrew Jackson.

money to buy "a coat of the finest material . . . trousers in harmony of color . . . with a white satin vest."

The star-spangled Francis Scott Key enlisted as Houston's attorney, but Sam ran the show himself. The trial lasted a month, and even in that era of Webster and Clay, Houston's oratory made history: "Sir, so long as that flag shall bear aloft its glittering stars—bearing them amidst the din of battle. . . ." And so on. He mentioned Greece, Rome, Caesar, Cromwell, Bonaparte, Blackstone, and the Apostle Paul. At the end, the great Shakespearean actor Junius Brutus Booth pushed through the crowd to embrace Sam Houston.

Sam's own reaction was lasting. "I was dying out," he said, "and had they taken

me before a justice of the peace . . . it would have killed me. But they gave me a national tribunal for a theatre, and that set me up again."

**A**ND ON THE ROAD. On December 2, 1832, Sam Houston reined his horse into the Red River and splashed his way into Texas. An eagle was circling overhead.

Why Texas? Well, John Quincy Adams insisted that Jackson and Houston secretly conspired to steal Texas from the 11-year-old Mexican Republic. So did most Mexicans. The Mexican secretary of war in those years, José María Tornel y Menéndez, wrote that "in the United States nothing is done without a preconceived plan . . . everybody works by common accord. . . ."

Perhaps he overestimated Anglo tidiness. Certainly in 1832 Texas was untidy. English-speaking colonists had been settling in that vacant subdivision of provincial Coahuila since the days of the Spanish crown. Mexican independence had come only in 1821—and the new republic had given way briefly to a monarchy, then to civil war. The state of Zacatecas seceded; so did Yucatán a bit later. The neglected area of Texas seemed ripe for change. The 20,000 Anglos and 5,000 Hispanics there seemed hardly worth the bother to the eight million other people of Mexico.

What kind of people were these Texans? Some, like Stephen F. Austin, hoped for the rights of trial by jury and religious freedom and were still loyal to their adopted homeland of Mexico. But by no means all.

"The first wetbacks," notes Dr. Nettie Lee Benson, of the University of Texas, "were the people who illegally crossed the Sabine River from the United States." Southerners, mostly, though generally not slaveholders, people seeking new land.

And the new land itself? "Texas is the finest portion of the globe that has ever blessed my vision!" So wrote Sam Houston. He bought acres of that land near the Trinity River and began the practice of law, representing eastern U. S. investors.

"He was an indifferent businessman," notes Robert Schaadt, director of the Sam Houston Center in Liberty, who has studied many of Houston's transactions. "He had a fortune in land, but never realized a profit."

**H**ouston's serious speculations were political. In February 1833, after traveling "near five hundred miles across Texas," he wrote Andrew Jackson that Texans were "without laws to . . . protect them. . . . The Government is essentially despotic. . . ."

The despot who now seized power in Mexico was Antonio López de Santa Anna, a disaster for Mexico and one of history's authentic vainglorious villains. Costumed like a peacock and styling himself the Napoleon of the West, Santa Anna scrapped the country's federal constitution and with remarkable cruelty began crushing all opposition. By the end of 1835 even the most reluctant Texans were discussing independence, though the cautious Sam Houston noted "it is yet too soon to say this publicly."

Not for long. Santa Anna's army moved into Texas to disarm the colonists. Shots were fired and tempers rose. A general consultation of elected delegates was called, and the men narrowly voted down a declaration of independence. Instead they set up a provisional state government within Mexico ("a triumph of potential confusion," it was called) and elected Gen. Sam Houston to command a Texas army.

General Houston was realistic: "We must meet the enemy with an army worthy of our cause," he cautioned. Houston wanted to consolidate his forces; Texas volunteers at Goliad should be redeployed; he ordered the Texans in San Antonio to blow up the Alamo ("nothing more than a church . . . surrounded by poplars"). His orders were superseded by the provisional council. Houston, "most miserably cool and sober," feared that "dissention will destroy Texas."

On February 28, elected delegates—among them Houston himself—met on the

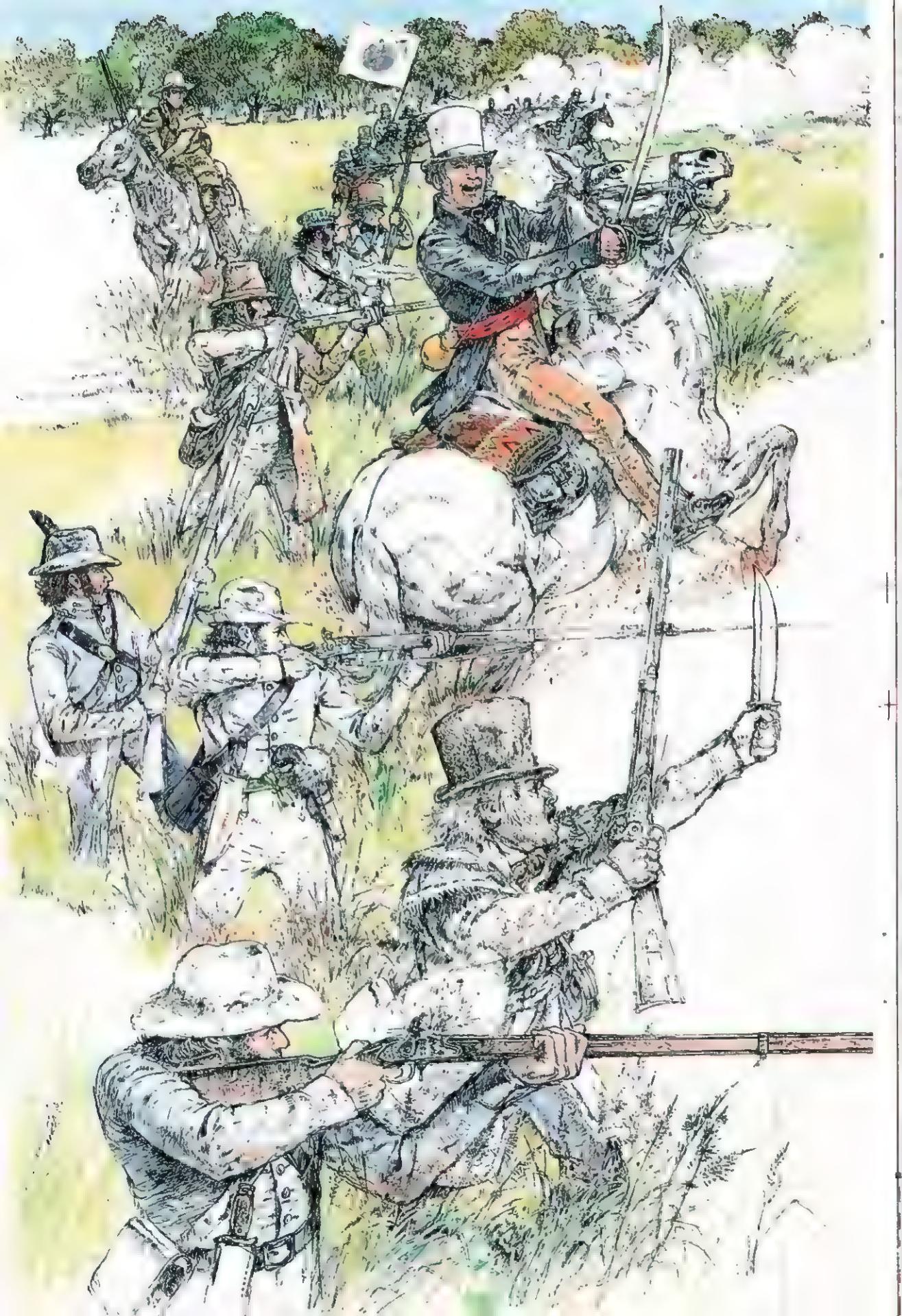


**Heroic figures** in the war for Texas independence ride again in *The Lone Star* (left), an outdoor drama staged each summer in Galveston.

Represented at center is Sam Houston in his Cherokee buckskins, flanked by Mexico's General Santa Anna, Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, Houston's scout Deaf Smith, Alamo commander Colonel Travis, and several wranglers.

A more sorrowful figure stands guard over the fortress at Goliad (below), where a detachment of Santa Anna's forces massacred 352 Texas defenders.







"SURRENDER OF SANTA ANNA," BY WILLIAM H. HUDDLE, WHICH HANGS IN THE TEXAS STATE CAPITOL, AUSTIN. COURTESY TEXAS HIGHWAYS MAGAZINE

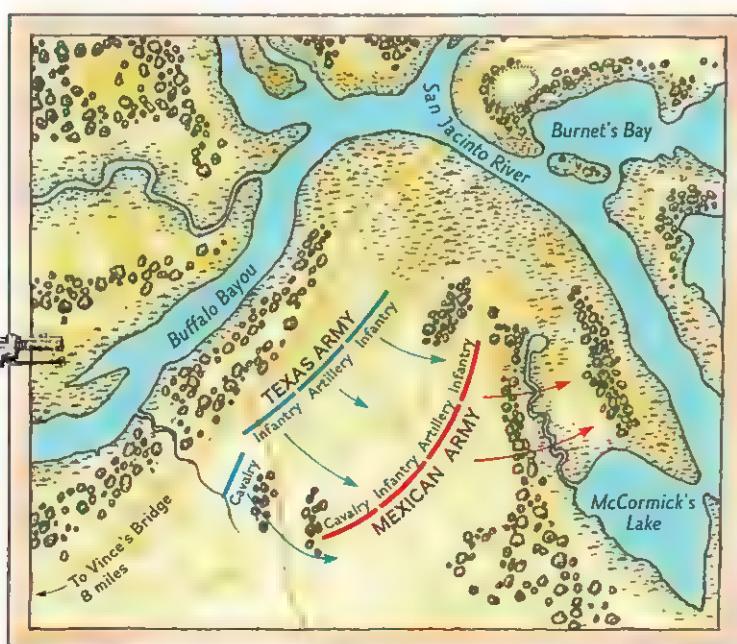
# The Battle of San Jacinto

INSCRUTABLE as always, Houston had formed his plans in Indian-like secrecy, divulging nothing to his mutinous lieutenants, nothing to his troops. But all knew that

here, along the banks of the San Jacinto River, Houston meant to end his cat-and-mouse game with Santa Anna. At midafternoon there was no sign of life from the Mexicans, who had

camped several hundred yards away across a field.

Finally came the order to assemble. The band of one fife and one drum struck up the popular love song "Will you come to the bow'r I have shaded for you?" and Houston ordered a charge. Cries of "Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!" stirred the blood of Texans swarming toward the Mexican camp. Surprise was total: Despite desperate attempts to rally, the Mexicans were overwhelmed as Texans fell upon them with Bowie knives and rifle butts. In 20 minutes the battle was over. Santa Anna had donned civilian clothes and tried to escape but was captured, suspicions aroused by his fine underwear and confirmed by Mexican cries of "*¡El Presidente!*" as he was led into camp. He surrendered to Houston, who lay under a tree, his leg shattered by a rifle ball (above).



BATTLE PAINTING BY JOHN DAWSON



banks of the Brazos River to organize a government. The time and place were dreary. A rainy blue norther chilled the delegates, but on March 2—Houston's 43rd birthday—they put their names to a declaration of independence.

By then the Alamo was under siege, and Houston set off with volunteers to try and save Col. William B. Travis and his 188 men. But on the way, Houston left his army for a moment and, as he had learned from the Indians, held his ear to the earth. Not the faintest rumbling disturbed the morning calm. He knew the guns had ceased in San Antonio. The Alamo had fallen.

When three Alamo survivors rode into camp—a young widow, her baby, and a servant—panic seized the Texas army. Houston rallied the men with his own booming voice, but despair was spreading.

"We cannot fight the enemy ten to one, in their own country," wrote Houston. His strategy was formed: Retreat to the more populated east Texas and hope enemy forces would divide.

It was a dark moment, comparable to George Washington's forlorn retreat across New Jersey. The Texans at Goliad had fought and fallen—every prisoner of war ordered shot by Santa Anna. Flee, whimpered some. Fight, shouted most. An orderly retreat took courage, especially when

mutinous volunteers accused their leader of incompetence and even cowardice.

"The enemy are laughing you to scorn," wrote Provisional President David G. Burnet to Houston in early April. "You must fight them. You must retreat no farther." But Houston continued his retreat through cold mud to the Gulf coast. Men slept in the rain and awoke an hour before dawn to reveille beaten on a drum by a sleepless General Houston himself.

For all its discomfort, rain had served the Texans well. Santa Anna's three armies were delayed and separated. The dictator's own force, some 1,500 men, were camped near Buffalo Bayou on San Jacinto Bay.

AND SO, AT LAST, Houston had his chance. He studied his much marked map, for he had never seen this spot before. He made an eloquent speech to his troops: "Victory is certain! . . . Remember the Alamo!" He had given them their battle cry.

On the morning of April 21 General Houston slept past reveille—his first real rest in six weeks—and awoke to full daylight. He studied the clear sky . . . and saw an eagle circling overhead. He dawdled, or seemed to, until 3 p.m. As the sun slanted behind him, Houston formed his troops. This was Mexican siesta time; the confident Santa Anna was sleeping, as were many of his men. They would wake, if at all, to face a westering sun behind the Texans.

At four, Sam Houston, astride a big white horse, raised his sword. A drum and fife began to play, and the ragtag army moved out of the mossy oak trees that

**Texas-size shrine**, a limestone obelisk towering 15 feet higher than the Washington Monument marks the hilltop where Texas won her freedom—an event celebrated annually at the San Jacinto Monument (facing page). Ceremonies will mark the battle's 150th anniversary on April 21, 1986. Inside, four generations of Houston's descendants (below) gather amid a display of battlefield memorabilia.



concealed them and up a slight incline. The Mexicans did not stir. Then came the noise of battle, the rumble of hooves as the Texas cavalry charged, the blast of Houston's two small cannon, his infantry's first shocking volley. And men's voices shouting, "Remember the Alamo!" Surprise was utter.

Confusion and carnage lasted only 20 minutes. It took longer for Texans to tally the extent of victory: 630 Mexicans killed, 208 wounded, 730 taken prisoner. The Texas army of 900 warriors had lost nine men.

**S**AM HOUSTON lay in prideful pain. A bullet had splintered his right leg when his horse was killed beneath him. The tableau is familiar to all Texans: Old Sam Jacinto lying beneath an oak, a humbled Santa Anna standing before him. The painting is a Texas icon, our heroic kinfolk wedged in wholesale. (Lyndon B. Johnson's great-great-uncle John Wheeler Bunton is half hidden by a tree trunk—which prompted LBJ to question the authenticity: "My uncle would never have gotten behind a tree when they were taking a picture!")

Houston saved Santa Anna from a lynching and thus assured the dictator's recognition of the free Republic of Texas. And Houston, who certainly never hid behind a tree, was elected the republic's president.

His tasks were terrible. Annexation by the United States was impossible, since war with Mexico would have been a certain consequence. The new republic was embattled and broke, and its president lived in a shack. It's hard to conceive such poverty if we visit the San Jacinto battlefield today, hemmed in by the hardware of

oil refineries and grain elevators, its channel a mobile of merchant ships. And just to the west stands the city named for Sam Houston, fourth largest in the U. S., richer than Croesus and Texas tall. Yet when artist-naturalist John James Audubon journeyed to Houston City, in 1837, he described "the president's mansion" as "a small log house, consisting of two rooms," the "ground floor . . . muddy and filthy."

Sharing his quarters with the surgeon-general (they slept on camp cots), Houston brought some order to his frontier republic. But toward the end of his first term, he took again to his ardent spirits while Texas returned to untidy ways.

Things grew worse for Texas with Houston out of office. But for the man himself, fortune smiled. At 47 he courted and married an Alabama beauty, Margaret Lea, age 21. As an exemplary family man, Sam Houston was overwhelmingly reelected president of Texas.

The republic was now too poor to buy firewood for the president's residence. Mail service ceased. The Texas minister to France pawned his watches to pay bills. Houston cut his own salary by half. When Santa Anna threatened Texas anew, Houston himself guaranteed the cost of sugar and coffee for Texas troops.

Hope lay in U. S. annexation—or perhaps a protectorate with England or France. Houston played a cagey game. U. S. abolitionists wanted no more states



with southern sympathies. William Lloyd Garrison said, "All who would sympathize with that pseudo-Republic hate liberty, and would dethrone God."

Yet other Americans felt uneasy about a British protectorate for Texas. Houston kept options open and statesmen guessing.

When the British pressured Santa Anna to sue for peace, Texans celebrated. Especially President and Mrs. Houston, now the parents of a son. A bumper grain harvest made the Texas dollar more valuable than the U. S. dollar, and the young republic was recognized by France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and now Great Britain. Even the old ailing Andrew Jackson worried that Europeans would somehow seduce Texas.

**H**ouston's game of diplomacy ended with his second term. Though the Texas Constitution excluded him from another, he had set events moving. In less than three months a resolution for the annexation of Texas passed in the U. S. Congress, so Texas became the 28th state of the U. S. A. Houston later tipped his hand: "If ladies are justified in making use of coquetry . . . you must excuse me for . . . the same means to annex Texas to Uncle Sam."

As U. S. senator, Houston went to Washington in 1846, in time to counsel



EUGENE C. BARKER  
TEXAS HISTORY CENTER,  
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

*"Lord help the fish down below!"* Houston told a friend who congratulated him on having his sins washed away in Little Rocky Creek (left) at age 61. Others had pitied Margaret Lea (above) when the 21-year-old Alabama belle married the Texan, then 47 and a man "accustomed to the elaborate comforts of an Indian wigwam" and "totally disqualified for domestic happiness" in the eyes of onlookers. Yet Houston relished his role as husband and father; he and Margaret had eight children.



CULVER PICTURES (ABOVE); GEORGE EASTMAN HOUSE COLLECTION

**"The noblest Roman of them all,"** read the caption of this 1861 cartoon about Houston's refusal, as governor of Texas, to swear allegiance to the Confederacy despite threats of violence and impeachment. A U. S. senator when the 1850 daguerreotype (facing page) was taken, Houston at one time fancied himself as the Consul Marius, who stood fast even as all Rome reviled him.

to be branded a traitor in my old age?" His bare bosom, as one man described it, had hair "as thick as a buffalo mop."

Even so, his enemies gave Houston a trouncing. The legislature was set to dump him as senator. Two years later, though, he ran again for governor.

"Mark me," he said in his one big campaign speech, the day of secession "will be written . . . in the blood of humanity. . . ."

This time Houston won the election. The large Houston family moved into the handsome new governor's mansion in Austin—seven children and another soon to come. It was the longest period of family life that Houston had ever enjoyed.

Family legends still abound. Like the time prankish six-year-old Andrew Jackson Houston locked the door of the senate chamber while the senators were in session—and hid the key. His father had to threaten the boy with a term in jail before Andrew would tell where the key was hidden. Later the governor observed that his son had better control over the senate than he did himself.

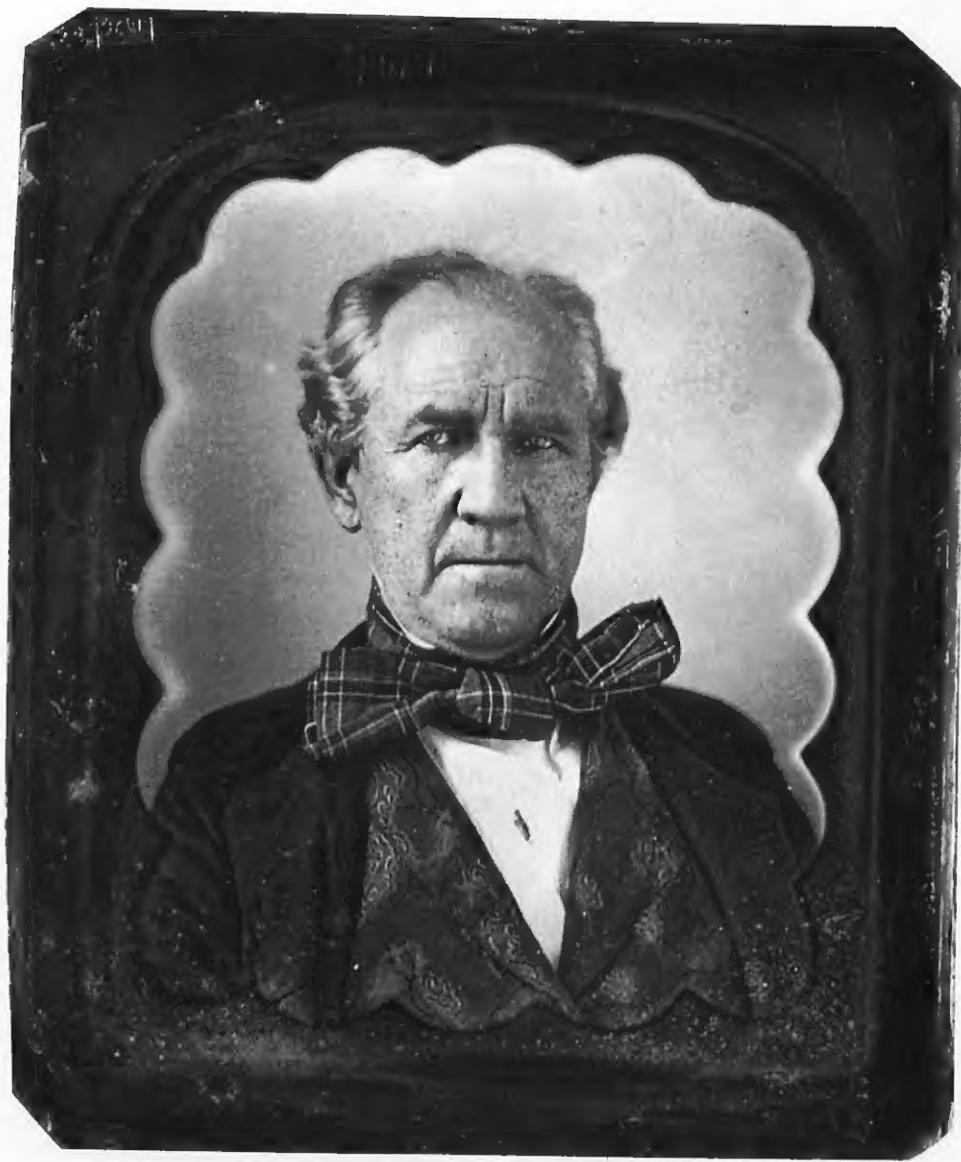
**H**E WAS PROBABLY RIGHT. Secessionists were busy; one even pled for a "Texan Brutus" to kill the governor. After Lincoln's election in 1860, a vote was scheduled for the secession ordinance. Houston again took to the stump. Asked what he thought of one secessionist leader, he replied scathingly, "He has all the characteristics of a dog except fidelity."

President Polk strongly against war with Mexico; he favored the peaceful purchase of western lands. He shuttled between his Texas homes and Washington, leaving Margaret and his growing family in Texas. But he wrote loving letters home, and attended a Baptist church in Washington, which pleased his devoted wife. He also had national concerns. Some Southerners were advocating nullification. Not Sam Houston: "I am as unionfied as General Jackson was. . . ." People had even begun to mention Houston for President of the United States: a Union Southerner.

But the slavery question dogged him, as it did the nation. Houston himself owned a few slaves, like the house servants he had bought to prevent the separation of children from their family. He later freed them. But he had as little love for abolitionists as for Jefferson Davis: "as cold as a lizard and as ambitious as Lucifer."

When Houston voted against the Kansas-Nebraska Act (it permitted the westward spread of slavery), his enemies yelled in wrath. Houston defied them in 1857 and ran for governor, independent of any party.

**I**T WAS A HOT SUMMER and a hotter campaign. Sam rolled across the state in his buggy, tore off his shirt, and orated. "What! I a traitor to Texas!" he bellowed, limping on his San Jacinto ankle. "Was it for this I bared my bosom to the hail of battle—



Crowds grew hostile. But the old warrior roared on: "Your fathers and husbands, your sons and brothers, will be herded at the point of the bayonet. . . . The North . . . will overwhelm the South."

But when ballots were tallied, 18 counties voted for the Union, 104 for secession. The secessionist convention required all state officials to take oaths of allegiance to the Confederacy. Houston wrote out his farewell: "I will not yield those principles which I have fought for. . . ." He gracefully left the governor's mansion and knew two years of sorrow before he lay mortally ill in his Huntsville home. (The gray bedroom seems too small a place for a giant's death.) As Margaret read to him from her Bible, the old man spoke his last words, "*Texas . . . Texas! . . . Margaret. . . .*"

Eloquent to the end. But to me the one finest speech of this ambitious, glory-loving man was a silent one . . . when the secessionist convention had summoned him to renounce the Union. Houston was sitting alone in the basement of the capitol, whittling on a stick. A clergyman watched him and heard the summons from the convention above: "the *call* thrice repeated—'Sam Houston! Sam Houston! Sam Houston!' but the man sat silent, immovable . . . whittling steadily on." □



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KENNETH JOHNSON (BELOW)

